

SN

SCHOOL NUTRITION

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School Nutrition Association

317

Conflict In The Workplace

Can you keep
the peace in
kitchens,
cafeterias and
offices?



CULINARY
COMMUNITY
PARTNERS

READY TO
GO NUTS?

HAVE A NO
BUMMER
SUMMER

Keeping the PEACE

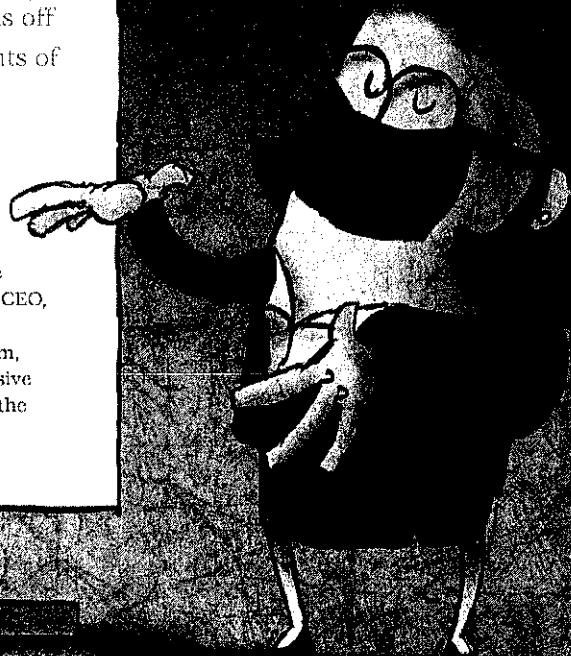
Conflict in the workplace is inevitable, but every member of the team can play a pivotal part in its resolution.

BY KELSEY CASSELBURY

One of the greatest things about the school nutrition profession is the diversity it attracts. When you enter a school kitchen or a central office, you're likely to see men and women of all cultures, ages, sizes, skin tone, hair color, fashion sense and more. This diversity can spur innovation and teamwork as you bounce ideas off one another and problem solve from different points of view.

Of course, diversity in opinions and approaches also can cause disagreements. You might not always recognize the value of your coworker, her ideas or her work ethic, and she might sometimes feel the same about you. In fact, no matter how harmonious your team is most of the time, some workplace conflict is inevitable; one study notes that 85% of employees at all levels, from entry-level to CEO, experience a degree of conflict at work.

As with any other human dynamic, conflicts can span a spectrum, ranging from mild disagreements to simmering resentments to passive aggressive responses to disrespectful and disruptive behaviors. For the duration of an active conflict—be it an hour or days—life can be uncomfortable and unpleasant.



That's why it's commonplace for many of us to choose to ignore conflicts, hoping they run their course without being addressed head on. Sometimes, they *do* go away. But sometimes, your failure to address—to *manage*—a conflict in a timely fashion can have far-reaching consequences. It may fester, like an untreated wound, and cause serious problems that affect a team's morale, productivity, efficiency, customer service and overall success. You might even lose valuable employees.

Keep in mind that avoidance is only one poor approach to conflict management and resolution. Heavy-handed confrontation, outsized reactions or punishments,

perceived favoritism—these are other mine traps that can challenge supervisors at all levels.

Of course, conflict management shouldn't be the responsibility only of the boss, either. *Everyone* on the team should be encouraged to handle conflicts with professionalism, maturity and respect—whether they are directly involved or simply doing their best to solve a situation. Let's look at four common conflicts in the workplace, reviewing how disgruntled staffers on both sides, as well as any mediators, might seek to address these effectively and without dire consequences.

SCENARIO #1: PROFESSIONAL ENVY

Terri was passed over for a recent promotion. It was given to her coworker Margaret, who has more foodservice experience and has demonstrated leadership skills. However, Terri has seniority within the district, so she thinks the decision was unfair. Terri is upset with both Margaret and the director, James, who made the decision. Although there haven't been any outbursts yet, there's noticeable tension in the kitchen, which is affecting the morale and productivity of the whole team. Can James diffuse the situation between the two staffers before the problem gets any worse? What roles should Margaret and Terri play in resolving the issue?

THE SUPERVISOR'S RESPONSIBILITY

It's time for a meeting with Terri, but not necessarily for disciplinary action. Chances are, Terri truly doesn't understand why Margaret received the promotion and she didn't. She might think that she's hit a dead-end in her career. Therefore, James should sit down with Terri to explain, without sugarcoating, the specific areas in which she needs to improve before she can be considered for advancement.

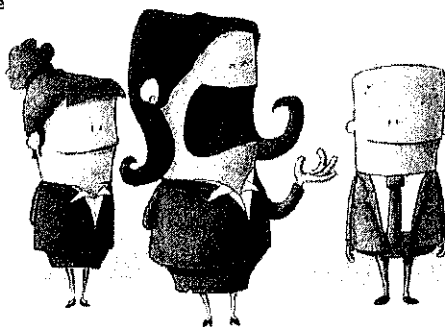
If James has problems explaining to Terri why she didn't get the promotion, it might be because he's not conducting regular performance evaluations. These records should be the basis of any employee's career movement. They can provide both James and Terri with documentation about her achievements and areas for improvement. James can use these records to give context for his decision why Terri was not a candidate for the promotion and explain what she needs to do to be a better candidate for future advancement.

Terri clearly needs an attitude adjustment, but it wouldn't help matters for James to take her to task for her disappointment—at least not at this stage. Instead, James should focus on reassuring Terri that she adds value to the organization in her current position. He might also consider giving her additional responsibilities as a stepping stone to a future promotion.

THE EMPLOYEE'S RESPONSIBILITY

There are two employees involved in this conflict. Margaret's responsibility in its resolution is fairly obvious: She needs to stay professional and treat Terri like any other coworker. She can't control Terri's reactions, but she can be mindful about Terri's feelings and avoid prolonged public conversations about the promotion, beyond acknowledging congratulations and assuming new responsibilities. If Terri's attitude is emotionally distressing to Margaret, or if she feels physically threatened by Terri, Margaret should approach James or the district's human resources department as soon as possible.

As for Terri, it always hurts to be passed over for a promotion that you think you deserve. But the workplace is not the setting to vent her disappointment or frustration. Terri should make an effort to look at the situation from an objective perspective. Then, in her conversation(s) with James, she should remove Margaret from the equation, keeping the discussion away from why Margaret got the promotion, and focused on why Terri *didn't* get it. Applying active listening skills is critical. Rather than simply assuming the decision was unfair, given her seniority, Terri must hear James out, ask questions and take his advice to heart. Then, she must be introspective and make some adjustments to both her work practices *and* her attitude to position herself better in the future for the job she desires.



SCENARIO #2: PERSONALITY CLASH

In the central office, two school nutrition supervisors, Charlie and Jennifer, have very different personalities that don't mesh well together. However, due to the nature of their job responsibilities, the two are required to work together daily. Maria, the director, certainly is aware of their bickering, and she's growing concerned about how it may be affecting the atmosphere in the office and the quality of their work. But she's completely snowed under in preparing for an upcoming administrative review and simply doesn't have the time or inclination to step in and address the problem right now. At what point does Maria need to interject herself into the situation, and how can Charlie and Jennifer work their personality clash out amicably on their own?

THE SUPERVISOR'S RESPONSIBILITY

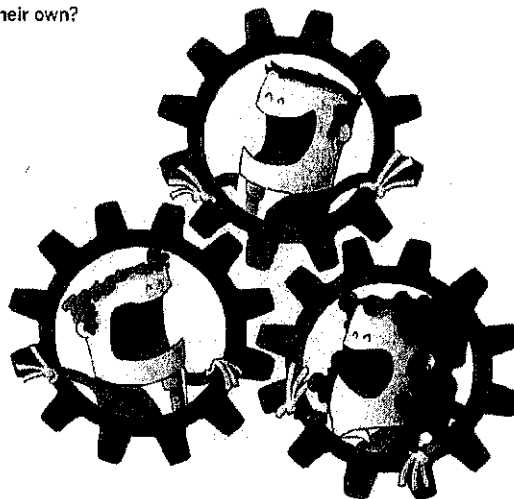
"The most common workplace conflicts I experience are truly just personality conflicts," notes Sandy Voss, MS, RD, SNS, director of Food & Nutrition Services, Marquardt School District 15, Glendale Heights, Ill. "There's not really a way to 'resolve' this problem, but there is a way to keep the conflict at bay." At the beginning of the year, Voss calls a staff meeting in which she openly addresses the potential for disagreements. "Sometimes we even do icebreaker activities around this," she recounts. "I then explain that we need to learn to be accepting and understanding of all the people we work with. You do not need to be best friends with your coworkers; you just need to respect one another."

Note that Voss doesn't tell her staff to be prepared to agree with others, but to accept the differences that arise. SNA Chief of Staff Jean Geraghty, who manages human resources at the Association's headquarters, affirms that conflicts "can be important teaching and learning opportunities" and advises supervisors to "strive for a culture where differing opinions are welcomed and respected." Indeed, research in this area suggests that the most effective teams are those in which members feel safe enough to disagree with each other.

With such a philosophy in mind, Maria should take care not to micromanage the tendency of Charlie and Jennifer to continually challenge each other. She should, however, keep an eye on the situation to assess whether their dynamic is becoming genuinely toxic to one another and others. Maria must step in if one of the pair threatens to quit, if the conflicts are becoming personal or if the behavior affects the morale and success of other team members caught in the middle.

If she feels the need to intercede, Maria should do so after tempers have cooled somewhat and not at the height of a flare-up; although she may be called upon to send the combatants to their separate corners, so to speak. In a kitchen setting, where there is little privacy and time is tight, Voss acknowledges that it can be difficult for her or one of her managers to tackle a conflict in the moment. "However, it's important that the employees in a given situation are made aware that this is an issue, and they will all be sitting down with the director, if need be, to come to a compromise," she notes.

Even then, it will take some time for Maria to gather and address the specifics of the situation with each employee separately and then to follow up with them together to ensure they both are given exactly the same counsel or warnings or any other steps she's decided upon in seeking resolution.



THE EMPLOYEE'S RESPONSIBILITY

Charlie might not like Jennifer's sarcastic nature, and Jennifer might take issue with Charlie's bossy attitude, but they both strongly agree with the mission of the department. They should discuss how to put aside their differences to get the work done.

If they want to keep the jobs that they love, Charlie and Jennifer will have to find a way to work together, despite their differences. They should do what they can to resolve conflicts on their own, bringing their director in to mediate only as a last resort. Someone will have to make the first move toward a truce. Whomever is ready to prioritize maturity over pride or irritation in finding common ground, she or he should do so face to face, rather than via email. The one-sided nature of email makes it notorious for misinterpretation and for lengthening a dispute by a prolonged focus on each party's grievances, rather than the effort to find compromise.

If Maria needs to get involved, though, both of her employees should refrain from throwing the other under the bus or being a tattletale. And, whatever they do, both Charlie and Jennifer should only address the problem with each other or with Maria, and not other coworkers. "Talk with someone who is in a position to do something about it, rather than with coworkers or friends," advises Geraghty. "Spreading frustration and possibly gossip and anger to other employees over a situation that they can't possibly resolve is very damaging to a [team]."

SCENARIO #3: THE NEW BOSS

Helen was just hired as a cafeteria manager, and she's incredibly enthusiastic about working in a new school—maybe a bit too much. Her new team reports that Helen constantly checks in on their work status, monitors their breaks down to the second and, overall, goes a bit too far with micromanagement. There are rumors that a few employees might request positions at another cafeteria site within the district to get away from their overbearing manager. How should Helen's own supervisor, Jody, find the middle path between giving her new manager the wings to fly, without risking a destructive mutiny?



THE SUPERVISOR'S RESPONSIBILITY

First, Jody should make herself available to speak with any of Helen's employees who have expressed concern. It's important to assess whether they have legitimate grievances or if they simply need to adjust to a new style of leadership. Either way, Jody should provide some mentorship to her new manager and establish periodic check-ins specifically to address personnel management, rather than foodservice-specific issues. As a coach, Jody can temper criticism about Helen's management choices with praise for her enthusiasm and desire to do a good job.

While ensuring that Helen is aware of any complaints and concerns from her team, Jody should inquire as to the reasons behind Helen's management choices. What her employees perceive as undue scrutiny may be proper supervisory responses to inappropriate behaviors and practices that have gone unchecked by her predecessor for far too long.

All employees should feel heard about their concerns, but this does not mean either Jody or Helen should feel compelled to make changes simply to keep the peace or be "liked" by the team. Both levels of management should ensure that the door is open for ongoing discussion with employees, being open to appropriate compromise while allowing for a suitable adjustment period to the new dynamic to take its natural course.

THE EMPLOYEE'S RESPONSIBILITY

In most cases, an employee should follow the chain of command in the workplace, recommends Carol Gilbert, SNS, a consultant and trainer in K-12 school nutrition. "However, there may be times when situations arise in which you don't feel you can discuss the problem with your immediate supervisor," she notes. If you feel it's important to take a concern to the next level of supervision, "Be prepared to share facts, details and what you would like to see resolved," Gilbert suggests. To be taken seriously, you need to be prepared to make a case and not just a complaint.

Employees should be aware that this approach is not a conflict avoidance tactic. Let's say Sophia, a fellow coworker, has decided things are so intolerable that she must go over Helen's head and bring concerns directly to Jody. Making Jody aware of her grievance does not mean that Sophia won't have to deal directly with Helen about this and other issues. Jody won't wave a magic wand and make the problem go away. Voss says that she sometimes coaches an employee on how to go back to the manager and communicate more effectively about the concern at hand. "I tell them that it is very important that they are the ones communicating with the manager, as that will build trust and a relationship."

DEALING WITH THE WHINERS, GRUMBLERS

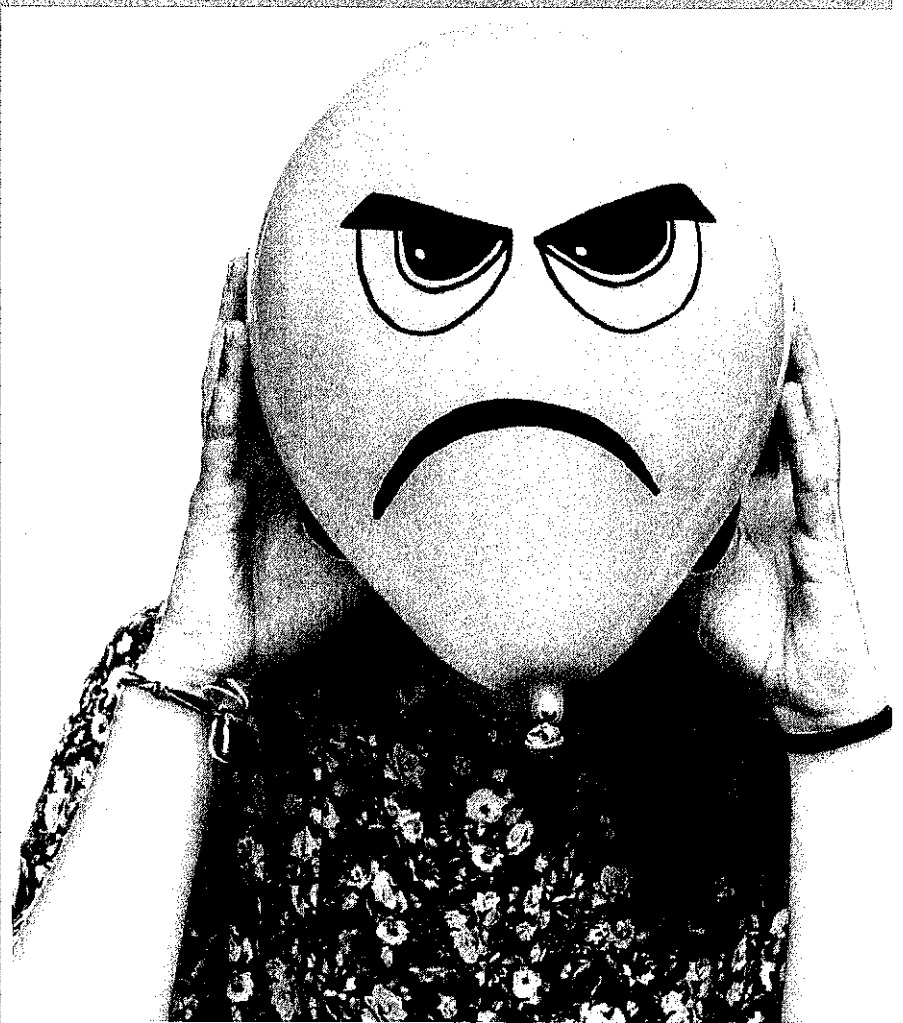
Mean GIRLS (AND GUYS)

BY PATRICIA L. FITZGERALD

In this month's "First Word" column, I sent literary hearts and flowers to *School Nutrition* readers, because you are all the nicest, most thoughtful, most creative, dedicated, enthusiastic, hard-working people I know.

Well, *most* of you are.

I'd like to believe that *every* school nutrition professional deserves to be atop the pedestal I put you upon. But I suspect that more than a few of you reading this article might be saying to yourself, "Well, I think that *I* may fit this description, but I sure know a few of my employees or coworkers don't!"



AND RABBLE ROUSERS THAT CREATE A TOXIC WORKPLACE.

In most professions, personnel management is the single hardest and most demoralizing part of the job. I hear it from school nutrition directors, supervisors and managers all the time: "This job would be perfect, except for the personnel issues."

The fact is that you can have a fantastic team in place, but just one person, one bad seed, makes you dread coming to work each morning. And, of course, bad seeds don't generate headaches only for supervisors. They tend to cause conflict among their coworkers and frequently wind up demoralizing the entire team.

How do you dig up the bad seed whose root system has grown deep and dogged? In most work environments, they can be like dandelions overtaking your lawn—very hard to eliminate. Contracted agreements and district policies offer valuable protections for all employees, including those with performance problems. Terminations can be a long, protracted process. But firing an employee should be the *last* step you turn to in addressing their negative attitudes and behaviors.

So, where does that leave you? Praying that the clearly discontented individual will one day see the light,

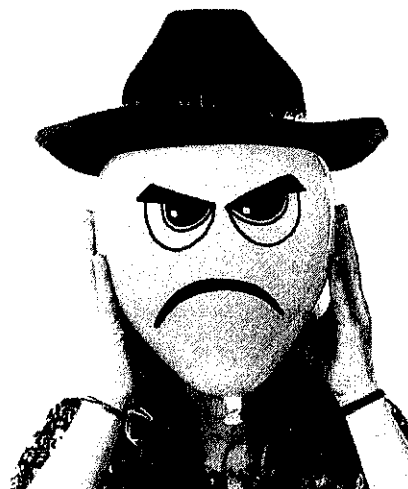
quit this job and darken your door no more? Yeah, nothing wrong with trying that. But a better use of your energies is to begin by seeking to identify the specific ways that your bad apple employee is creating a toxic environment and addressing these head-on. In some individuals, negative attitudes and poor performance are *symptoms* of underlying unhappiness that you may be able to address in the workplace (without playing the role of psychotherapist).

The heartening news is that in the case of many disgruntled employees, it doesn't take a whole lot to turn Negative Nancy into Positive Polly; often, just being "heard" about her concerns is enough to help her come around and demonstrate the qualities you saw when you hired her. But supervisors should take care not to get overly optimistic either. Sometimes, the individual is simply not a good fit on your team, and you can waste a lot of time and effort on someone who remains stubbornly unwilling to change. If this is the case, then you must resign yourself to the path and process of documented warnings, performance improvement plans and other steps that may lead to termination.

But let's stay focused on constructive approaches to managing poor-performing employees, looking at just a few examples to help you identify what might be at the root of bad attitudes and consider tactics that may help them come around—or at least be less destructive to your team. There are many types of whiners, grumblers, idea-killers, naysayers, slackers, rabble rousers, bullies and other mean girls (and guys) working in school nutrition. We don't have the space to explore them all, but the suggestions here should help you to start thinking in new ways about dealing with your problem employees.

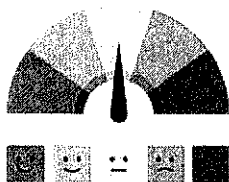
One final reminder: Although supervisors bear the burden of having to manage situations that arise with toxic employees, *everyone* on the team can play a role in making things better or worse. Raising everyone's awareness—regardless of position level—is a critical first step.





THE WHINER

Play the poor whiner—because she certainly pities herself!



Positive reinforcement may help relieve job insecurities and build coping skills needed for the job.

Joan's primary job responsibilities are to do some light menu prep and serve meals to the students at the middle school. As with most of her colleagues, she's expected to jump in and help out with other tasks when circumstances dictate. But every time she's asked to do something she considers outside her "real" job, she complains bitterly.

Joan alternates between playing the put-upon martyr and trying to wriggle out of the assignment. "Why do you always make me do this and not Margie?" "The boxes are too heavy and I'm too short." "I guess I will, but don't blame me if I can't finish my other task on time." "I don't remember how to do that; someone will have to show me." "I hurt my back this weekend, but I guess I'll just power through it, since no one else can do it."

Joan is the antithesis of a team player. Her complaints are so regular and so dramatic that her manager finds it easier simply *not* to ask and either do it herself or ask another staffer. Resentment builds across the team, and now Joan is whining about feeling shunned by her coworkers.

Although her behavior may add to your gray hairs, when you force yourself to be genuinely objective, you must admit that when she's *not* complaining, Joan is a solid performer. She's organized, thorough and makes few mistakes. She's really good in her interactions with the middle school kids, and

we know *they* can be a handful! So, why is she such a pill the rest of the time?

STRATEGY: Consider tracking Joan's complaints to see if you can find a common thread. For example, if they are usually related to last-minute changes in plans, it may be that Joan simply doesn't have the skill set to cope when forced out of her lane. Fast-moving changes may make her anxious or insecure about her ability to perform to expected standards—both yours and her own. Complaining may be the way that she articulates her fear of failure.

So, how do you address this, given that it's a common occurrence in your school cafeteria? Consider countering Joan's complaints with reassurances, instead of sighs. "I know you'll do the best you can; I'm not expecting perfection." "I know I can count on you, because you're always so good at this, even when we're under the gun." "Thanks so much for going the extra mile today—I don't know what we'd do without you." Positive reinforcement may help relieve Joan of her insecurities and allow her to build the coping skills this job requires.

In addition to positive reinforcement, consider other steps that might help address her concerns. Although Joan needs to understand that she may need to help with a wide array of tasks, maybe you can identify those extras that are best-suited to her abilities and comfort zone, as well as those that give her the most heartburn, and then make attempts to delegate with this information in mind.

Keep in mind that performance anxiety is just *one* potential source behind a whiner's behavior. Regardless of whether you can identify a common thread, you should make time to address her behavior, using concrete examples, in performance discussions.

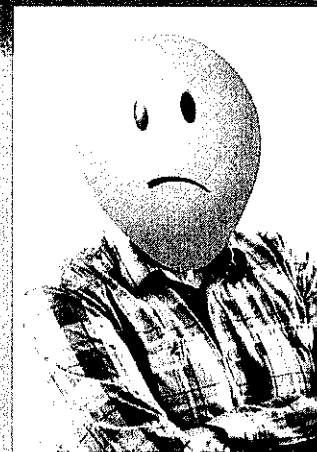
THE GRUMBLER

Clasically related to the adgysapny and ideat-skiln, the grumbler despises change.

Lucy is a 20-year veteran manager in your operation. She's outlasted four principals and two school nutrition directors and has seen many changes

in federal requirements for meals, purchasing, food safety and now professional standards. You'd think she'd be used to change being a constant in the cafeteria, but she hates it and resists it with every bone in her body.

It feels like Lucy challenges every statement you utter and would deny that the sky is blue, just to be contrary.



Don't Miss SNA's First



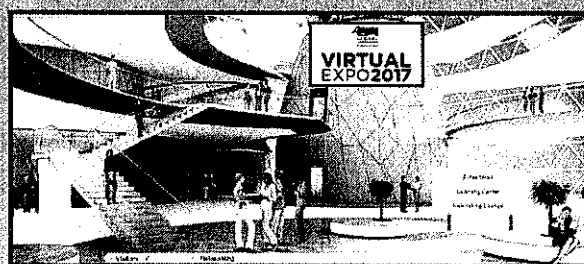
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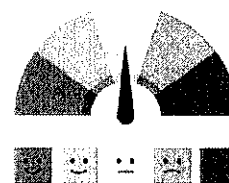
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Try giving the grumbler a new list of strategies to pursue and allow her to rank them. This gives her some autonomy to choose what might be more palatable.

"That's a stupid new rule. It doesn't even make sense." "That idea will never work here. I just don't see our kids/ladies/principal/teachers going for it." "Aren't we doing enough already, and now you want to add something new?"

At the end of the day, Lucy gets the job done. She's reliable and efficient. She's meeting the bottom line goals for her site, so it's difficult to challenge her about the effects of her attitude. Still, hers is always the last site you visit, and you dread her responses at monthly manager meetings. There's little energy and camaraderie among her staff, and they rarely participate in such promotional activities as National

School Breakfast Week or creative nutrition education partnerships with teachers.

STRATEGY: Lucy may be grumbling because most of the changes she's endured have been dictated and directed from the outside. Even though *you* are willing to give her more autonomy in suggesting improvements and fresh ideas, she may be burned out on the very concept of something else that's *new*.

Find a compromise with Lucy. Give her a list of new strategies that you'd like her team to pursue to grow participation at their site, and ask her to rank these in order of her personal preference. The action of ranking these means Lucy can't treat them all with the same level of disdain or rejection. It also gives Lucy some authority in choosing what might be most palatable. As she is compelled to apply this autonomy repeatedly, she may become more accustomed to and welcoming of change.

Admittedly, this is something of a long shot. It's difficult to rehabilitate a confirmed grumbler. You may have to just confront them with the reality and consequence of their behavior and make it a part of a performance improvement action. At the very least, you can assert the rule: "If you don't have something nice to say, don't say anything at all."



THE RABBLE ROUSER

*Mixing it up and causing trouble
is the source of a rabble rouser's power.*

Michael joined the school nutrition team as a cook at a high school production kitchen after several years working at local restaurants. He likes the hours, the kids and all of his coworkers—but what he *really* likes is the attention and novelty he gets as a younger guy working among a group of older women.

Instead of being isolated as a minority, Michael gets right into the thick of things, sharing the latest gossip ("I just heard that Martina got called in for that mistake she made with the beef taco mix. Do you think she'll get fired?"), bad-mouthing common "enemies" ("The principal here is such a jerk.") and challenging authority ("I don't mind adding afterschool suppers to the prep list, but I think we should get paid more, if the district is getting more revenue.")

But Michael is also a popular member of the team. His coworkers find him funny and engaging—and you do, too. He's also a good cook, gets to work on time and is willing to help out when chaos reigns. But his tendency to stir the pot often creates unnecessary tension and disharmony in the team. You've lost count of the number of conversations you've had with anxious or upset employees that begin with: "Michael said..."

STRATEGY: Can you find ways to give Michael the attention and power he clearly craves that will direct his energies in a more positive direction? He may not have the ambition or talent to be put on a managerial track, but perhaps you can allow him to take the lead on a project that will put him in the spotlight. Maybe send Michael to a training class on food art and other presentation techniques and then let him



Find ways to give the rabble rouser the attention and power he clearly craves that will direct his energies in a more positive direction. Allow him to take the lead on a project that will put him in the spotlight.

teach those in his kitchen and others what he's learned.

It's likely that you will still have to directly address his tendency to gossip and challenge the chain of command, but if he can have other outlets that satisfy a similar core need, it may be easier for him to break toxic attitude habits. In addition, most rabble rousers are not looking to cause pain and suffering, they just enjoy the power and attention. So if you share with Michael some of the negative outcomes of this behavior, this awareness may prompt him to knock it off. SN

Patricia Fitzgerald is editor of School Nutrition.



BONUS CONTENT

Mean Girls (and Guys)

What can you do when the bad seed in your workplace is your boss? SN explores this aspect of interpersonal workplace dynamics as part of this month's online extras. Frustrated with a supervisor who suppresses your creativity and depresses your spirit? Head online for some suggested tactics.

Visit www.schoolnutrition.org/snmagazinebonus to access.

LOOK IN THE MIRROR



Are you a bad apple employee? Few of us would readily admit that we are the source of our own unhappiness at work. It's always someone or something else that's making it a miserable place to be, right? School nutrition can be a tough, thankless job. The pace is too fast, the budgets are too tight, the rules are too many and the rewards are too few.

All this may be true, but is this how you'd *regularly* describe your job—all negative, without any positive counterbalance? If so, then it's probably past time for a period of self-reflection about your job satisfaction. Because it's likely that your negativity has begun to leak out and show up in your attitude and performance, affecting others around you.

If self-reflection doesn't come naturally to you, you may want to seek the ear and advice of a family member, friend, clergy person or counselor. Find someone who you can be open and honest with—but who also will be objective and hear what you're *not* saying, as much as what you are.

Libraries and bookstores have many self-help books that specifically address job satisfaction and offer advice and guidance you through a self-assessment. Some titles to consider are:

- » *Love Your Job: The New Rules for Career Happiness*, by Kerry Hannon
- » *No More Blue Mondays: Four Keys to Finding Fulfillment at Work*, by Robin A. Sheerer
- » *No More Dreaded Mondays: Ignite Your Passion—and Other Revolutionary Ways to Discover Your True Calling at Work*, by Dan Miller
- » *Quitter: Closing the Gap Between Your Day Job & Your Dream Job*, by Jon Acuff

In addition, AARP, the nonprofit organization providing support for people 50 and older, offers several resources designed to help you achieve career happiness. Visit www.aarp.org.